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THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY





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Introduction

CAN we still believe in the resurrection of the body? This question is frequently raised today, and not only by non-Christians, of whom the Scriptures already relate that "...when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this'" (Acts 17, 32). Rather, the question is often put by those who claim to be Christians. Because even among Christians there are those who think that the man of today could not believe in the resurrection of the body even if he tried, and that his Weltanschauung admits no such concept. Belief in the resurrection of the body remains merely as a traditional but unviable requisite of the accredited expression of the Christian faith; it must be transposed, its actual meaning extricated from its mythological trappings, and expressed instead in terms of existential philosophy. In order to justify the demythologization of this article of faith in theological terms one would try to point out that it does not play the same central role throughout Scripture, and that it seems already to have been "translated" in the original Gospel of St. John, in which the exegesis of the concept is carried out in a different way. This article of the Creed is therefore now threatened with radical revision and even outright rejection. And, in an-

other way, it is threatened by orthodox Christians. For this truth, which was basic for St. Paul and the Christianity of his time, has since lost much of its significance in the minds of most of today's Catholic Christians. It is not so much a matter of denial than a tendency to relegate it to the very edge of conscious belief and of "leaving well enough alone." Even the pious Christian often does not find his hope and consolation for his mortal life on a belief in the resurrection of the body, but rather in the immortality of the soul and the beatific vision: he prefers to think of his body returning to the dust whence it came, and of his soul, now freed, ascending to God from whom it came. For St. Paul, the resurrection and Christ's parousia at the end of history are the prerequisites for the culmination of perfection he hopes for; (only once, perhaps, does he envisage a not fully perfected end limited simply to the death of an individual — and this at the very edge of his Christian consciousness). If the average Christian would turn his thoughts away from the printed catechism and concentrate on its content as lived by him personally, he would wonderingly ask why he should be so interested in the final coming of Christ and the culmination of the All, since the person who dies in the state of grace is in any case already among the blessed and could not be particularly interested any more in the fate of the world below. In this way both Christians and non-Christians within and without the Church find it very hard to accept this article of the Christian faith. Thus the Church experiences the same difficulties as St. Paul did when he preached the resurrection of the body on the Areopagus. Resolute or disdainful mockery — "that sort of thing just

isn't possible," or, "we'll hear about it another time," — is still the prevalent response to this message of the Church.

This article of the Creed has always encountered problems in the history of its revelation and in its acceptance and rejection. Within the framework of Christian pre-history it appears first in the late stages of pre-Christian Judaeism; and it was a subject of debate at the time of Jesus and the original Christian community. Jesus asserts its truth unequivocally. In the apostolic preaching it constitutes an integral part of the original Christian teaching (*Hebr.* 6, 1) and is inseparable from those truths considered absolutely indisputable and central to the Christian faith because they form a unity with the profession of belief in the Resurrection of Christ; and those truths, added to the fact of our redemption through Christ's death, constitute the specifically Christian element in the apostolic message. However, this dogma of the Church found its way through the history of Christianity beset with difficulty from the very beginning. It was believed and preached; it found enthusiastic apologists to defend it against pagans and rational idealists such as the spiritualistic agnostics of early times, against the heresies of the Albigensians and Cathartics of the Middle Ages, against the enlightenment and rationalism of modern times. From the beginning it was examined by medieval theologians with an appreciable amount of spiritual interest within the framework of the *Weltanschauung* of the Middle Ages. There were even expressions of profound existential participation. For Tertullian at the beginning of the third century for example, the faith forms the cardinal point of salvation as against a merely intellectual, theological ideal-

ism. For all this it has always been difficult for this article of faith to become rooted in the minds and hearts of Christians. The Church Fathers inclined to Platonism find it difficult to include the flesh in the triumph of the spirit; much easier for them to conceive of the end as the freeing of the spirit from matter. In the history of the dogma regarding eschatology, theology comes to de-emphasize the resurrection of the body (a point never denied), and turns its scrutiny on the beatific vision; which is the just man's due immediately following death, before the end of the world. In the fourteenth century, Benedict XII dogmatized this truth. One could say that since then Christianity as a whole adopted a Platonic way of thinking; not theoretically as in the catechism, but pragmatically, in the choice of a life based on an implicit realization of it. In other words, Christianity focuses on the fate of the immortal soul after death, and regards the resurrection of the body, though handed down as part of Christ's testimony, as a relatively secondary and extraneous factor of the Creed that does not substantially alter man's final state of beatific vision. For this very reason the main force of anti-Christian denial of the tenet has strayed involuntarily from the resurrection of the body to the immortality of the soul, which it attempts to refute in the main with philosophical arguments.

The task of forming a truly original synthesis of the two truths in question has not been sufficiently espoused by modern Catholic theology. Although both truths are expounded as articles of faith, their inner unity is not really clear. It is not easy to see how they really fit together and form an entity with the one faith and the com-

plete realization of a single human being. However, it is easy to realize that such a task would evoke the problem of the unity of the spiritual-physical man in himself and with the world. Were this question to be considered anew in honest fashion, it might become clearer why the full perfection of the human spirit is realized only in the true corporeal salvation of the individual; thus the fate of humanity does not simply arrive at its end in an unphysical, unworldly way. While Catholic theologians profess belief in the resurrection of the body but usually treat it as a superfluous factor in its fate, their Protestant counter parts, where they resist the temptation to "demythologize," tend to consider the so-called "in-between-condition" between death and resurrection as unimportant or nonexistent; the resurrection of the body is seen as the absolutely new beginning of man, and no mention might be made at all, theologically, of the existence after death of the soul. Clearly the problem is solved in this instance by excluding our second premise. Catholic theology solves the same by reducing the first premise to a bagatelle.

One may gather from the sparse indications given above what a difficult and multi-faceted problem one encounters in attempting a solution. Obviously it is not within the scope of this little pamphlet to do much more than give directional hints in solving the problem. The first chapter will be reserved for the directive event, the reason behind the Christian's belief in the resurrection of the body: the Resurrection of Christ Himself. The two following chapters will be an attempt to show that this belief is of the substance of Christian Revelation, and to determine what it contains and rejects.

1. The Resurrection of Christ

WHEN we as Christians speak of the resurrection of the body in the Apostles' Creed, we profess at the end what we have already recognized to be true of the Lord: "raised from the dead." In this manner we profess belief in our future resurrection, not as the moral postulate of an idealistic sort, not simply as something to happen sometime in the future; but as an event already established through Christ, an already existing fact, which is still "to come" only because it has still to be realized in the human sphere. If this belief in our salvation based on this hope is made concrete, if it is concentrated in our belief in the resurrection of the body, then this hope of ours for salvation is unquestionably and unequivocally founded upon the Resurrection of the Lord. Thus St. Paul says quite plainly, "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 *Cor.* 16-19). For St. Paul, Christ's Resurrection is indissolubly linked with our own, and this unity con-

sequently becomes inseparable from the Christendom he alone knows. The meaning of our own resurrection must be explained in terms of Christ's. That is why we must speak of it.

It is difficult to begin such a discussion because of the mass of misunderstandings, difficulties, and *a priori* prejudices which block access to the matter and to its recognition. One who believes from the first that only those things which are provable right before our eyes any number of times are true, and that the absolutely unique is by the very fact of its uniqueness just dream or invention — such a person cannot be helped and must be excluded from our argument. Possibly one could ask such a person where he draws this premise from, be it actually expressed, or, as is more often the case, merely implied. It should be asked whether the unique and extraordinary — the miraculous, if you will — is not in the final analysis the one and only factor that lends real meaning to our existence. Many prejudices would still have to be coped with and explained, which would result in a proof of the prejudicial nature of the rejections the open question meets. It would need to be said that a historical event can prove existence; that the concept of miracle is not meaningless; that it is rationalistic prejudice to claim that a miracle is essentially untenable. To attempt all this in a short essay is impossible; we therefore postulate these preliminary questions to be answerable.

Before proceeding to the fact of Christ's Resurrection, one thing must be noticed, and that is how His Resurrection forms an entity with His life, His death, and His whole conception of Himself. He knows He is the Son of God,

quite indisputably. He lives in the awareness that His life is the pure fulfillment of what was ordained by God; that His life is a genuine reflection of God's nature, of the divine mercy that performs through Him the decisive act in the history of the world, the true all-encompassing breakthrough of God's kingdom as well as the realization of the saving will of His love for the whole world. What Jesus professes to be and what He proclaims cannot be limited to a particular sphere of human life, such as intention, introspection, or any other dimension that would not be allowed to enter into contact with the historical or with palpable reality. Just as Jesus recognizes the will of the Father in the most earthly and difficult of His experiences and even in death itself, He is also aware of the blossoming-forth of God's kingdom through His person — not only in His teaching and His example, but also in the miraculous cures, acts of power over nature, and in the raising of the dead. If He meets death, then His life must either actually conquer in *the* true historical dimension which is included in it as something indispensable; if not, life is not only vanquished but has failed completely. Jesus' *life* does not admit another alternative. In His case we cannot, as in the case of other lives with a heroic ending, choose the solution of claiming that He remained, and was victorious, *in spite of* the physical catastrophe of death. For had He not risen, He could no more lay claim to initiate God's kingdom in this concrete world than any other event to which it might owe its inception; one could not, then, hope to find its origins elsewhere since in instance it was not victorious. If Jesus, then, speaks of His Resurrection with death facing Him, this can only

be a simple consequence proceeding directly from the other aspects of His own interpretation of His existence. The report of Jesus' prophecy in the Gospels need not be an object of historical doubt, or an assertion attributed to Jesus at a later date.

Thus the question is reduced to whether the facts have borne out this unified view of Jesus as to His person and its historical meaning. One would have to reply in the negative, if not permitted to rescue anything at all of Jesus' person or teaching in accord with his own conception of Himself, certainly also the conception of St. Paul. In face of the unchanged tomb everything would have become questionable. Rather we may summon up the simple courage — we *must* do so — to assert, though our heart and soul both seem to melt away in deadly and beatific consternation at the thought, that "Christ is risen." Why? Because many of the disciples, who were not visionaries or suffering from hallucinations, saw Him risen, and found the tomb empty. He who asserts, "they *must* have been visionaries, *because* they saw Him," presupposes that Jesus *could not* have risen; one would have to ask such a person on what he bases such an *a priori* impossibility, and whether, faced with Jesus' person and His life, he would have the mortal courage to assert such a prejudice. He would also have to explain how the disciples, in absolute despair and without an iota of faith in Jesus, nevertheless somehow mustered the inclination to such visionary enthusiasm. To speak of deception is simply foolish. He who admits the Resurrection of Christ, testifies thereby to his belief (not a postulate, but an ungraspable fact) that God really performed His deed of mercy where we are, not in the realm

of the abstract, but in a place where death is palpable. He reaches a concrete decision for a concrete God where this deed, if it ever happened, did so most certainly: in the fate of Jesus. He who denies the resurrection should have to admit that the true God is in heaven and the true man on earth, without any certainty of a future dialogue. A man for whom the person of Jesus and His fate is not sufficient testimony for God in the world would be convinced only when God does come to this earth in all His power and glory. But then the time of free decision, the acknowledgment of God's deed in the present world, will have passed.

Naturally we cannot conceive of Christ's Resurrection in human terms. Contemplating it in such terms would involve us in impossible conjectures, and lead us into confusion without furthering the matter in hand. Since the Resurrection of Christ is the resurrection of perfection, the conquering of death and of binding, relative time-space (different from the raising of Lazarus) it becomes obvious that Jesus does not re-enter this earthly time upon His Resurrection; that He must *show* Himself through His own person if He wants to be seen by those whose perceptive ability belongs to this earthly time-space, and that He does not simply have to be seen by each and everyone of us if He can be seen at all by anyone. If the Lord who is risen shows Himself to His disciples He thereby simultaneously presents *the* vision that will be manifested when *humans* are initiated into the divine. Conclusions as to the precise quality of the transfigured Christ, if at all admissible, must be attempted with utmost caution. Of Christ's basic quality of existence we can assert only that

He is raised as a concrete, personal existence. Just exactly what the transfiguration means if it transforms Him completely in order to assert Him completely, in body and soul, we are not able to conceive of with our limited capabilities. But it is not necessary that we should, for if we could form such a conception, it would be untransformed, still subject to death and impermanence. We do not need to demythologize in order to accept Christ's Resurrection. We have always completely mirrored this truth, although we must express it in pictures and parables. But the fact that this life is of this earth, corporeal, and saved in its entirety, thereby becoming that which saves, — this is not myth but the most awe-inspiring but believable message of Christianity itself; a truth discovered and vindicated in the Resurrection of Christ.

II. The Fact of Our Resurrection

UNDERstanding our belief in our own resurrection comes to us through the Resurrection of Christ.

First of all there is no doubt that Jesus Himself taught the future resurrection of all men. His words concerning the judgment to come clearly bear witness to this — in fact He speaks not of a judgment of the single soul after death, but of a universal judgment of each man at the time of the resurrection of all. To the Christian for whom the word of Christ is the word of truth and salvation, belief in the resurrection of the body has a solid unshakeable foundation in the teaching of Christ. Nothing more need be said about this.

But there is something else which demands our consideration in Jesus' teaching which leads us on in our discussion. In teaching the resurrection of the body, Jesus is not the first to have promulgated a doctrine theretofore unknown. Rather He takes over, without any alteration, it would seem, a teaching which, although not universal, was certainly current in the theological world of His time. If we ask, then, *how* we can know about such a thing — let us for the moment treat the question independently

of Christ's testimony —, we can deepen our understanding of Jesus' teaching through the answer, if its content of truth rests permanently on His authority. To answer the question that has been posed we would have to say that the religious world in which this truth was discovered was a world which 1) could conceive of a human being only as whole and single in the concreteness of his corporeal existence; 2) understood history to be not the eternal return of the same, but as the dynamic progression, one-directional in a sense, of the one total reality towards a final end; 3) could not conceive of God, as an individual partner, dropping out of the completion of the whole, because as a result the history of salvation and disaster contained in the dialogue between man and God could not be taken seriously.

If we accept these three clauses, then the resurrection of the body is in the final analysis the very simple consequence of this basic religious conception of man and his history. The Old Testament and the spiritual world at the time of Jesus recognize only *that* human whose fate as a single human can be considered in a positive evaluation in the problem of perfection. In this spirit it is not possible to separate man into body and soul, even though the soul is said to "continue living" after death. For this reason it might be justified and necessary to ask, on theological and metaphysical grounds, what is contained in the interim between the death and the perfection of one single human being in his entirety. This question has certainly been put by Christian theology, working slowly and gropingly for centuries; answers have resulted which now belong to the expressed substance of the Christian faith,

for example those pertaining to the immortality of the soul, the likelihood of beatific vision immediately upon death, and so on. In expressing these articles of faith it is justifiable to use concepts which, although borrowed from Platonist or platonizing philosophy, nevertheless form an integral part of the definitely acquired realm of Christian metaphysical anthropology. But we may *not*, as is so often the practice in popular modern Christian theology, overlook the fact of the more basic unity of the single human being. This human, a corporeal entity, performs a salvation-disaster story with the concrete, living God, who speaks through the *audible* word of the prophet, the Word that in our history was made Flesh. And he performs his actions not only in the metaphysical-existentialist other-worldliness and impalpability of his spirit, his pure, nameless transcendence of conscience and inner being, but in the world in which he exists, with that which he really is, flesh and blood. If man is to have any absolute validity at all as a single human being before God, then he must experience his completion, his coming-to-finality, *as* such a concrete entity. The mystery of the resurrection of the body is simply an expression of this. Because the article in reality speaks of the fate of the body as if the fate of the soul were a completely different story from the start and quite clear already in any case; rather it speaks of the finality of man, of the concrete man, where it is not possible to separate from the start a certain basic constituent from his fate and completion, i.e., his corporeal existence, and render it as having no bearing on man's fate. If we profess the resurrection of the body, we say no different; but very definitely the following: concrete

man, not an idea or a postulate, not only a part of him, but he, the real partner of God in his salvation or damnation, has an absolute meaning, which is preserved, which persists, and which is revealed in the final completion of the created world in its entirety. Possibly we are now in a better position to honor these basic premises of the teaching of the resurrection than before: we feel ourselves to be children of this earth and this world; we cannot conceive of our actual and final emigration from it, we discover ourselves in the unity of our being in which the spirit is corporeal and the body spiritual, to the extent of psychosomatic medicine and the theories of Wholism. We deem to discover in modern physics that the world is unique and has a directed and finite history in which everything tends towards one conclusion. Given this point of view, we can now less easily conceive of the salvation of a moral being, who is a partner of the living God, in the emigration of the spirit into an acosmic other world. More than before we are faced with this dilemma: either we let man be dishonorably swallowed up, nihilist fashion, in the emptiness of the mere past, or we see him saved in entirety in the validity of the whole man; this last we call the resurrection of the body. Gazing upon the risen Lord gives us the courage to accept in our hearts and souls the resurrection to come for us.

It is in the origins of the teaching that the inner limits of this utterance, which are determined in the mode of expression itself, can be grasped. Actually we can glean nothing from it about the *manner* of this corporeal completion of the individual human being. Nothing is expressed on the point. Contrary to the fantastic apocalypse-theories

current at the time, Jesus Himself defies any *depiction* of the corporeality of the human individual. Such attempts result in the article's denial, and is here put as an example: neither do they woo, nor are they wooed. When, in the Scriptures, the condition of completion is depicted somehow in its settings or its existence, the lack of concern in the use of descriptions that are only indications for pure lack of words already indicate that the authors are quite aware of their inability to offer an anticipatory *reportage* on the resurrection and the final end of man. But one thing is constantly expressed in freely sketched abstractions: that the human individual moves towards his own entire completion, into which all the dimensions of his existence will be integrated, although through a radical transformation. This fact is expressed by the teaching of the resurrection as the truth of belief and the hope of life. Man may not choose to insert a third alternative between the finality of the completion of the entire man and the finality of nihilism by positing an immortality of the soul as the completion of man. Faced with concrete man in the concrete history of salvation in the *flesh* and not in pure spirit, in the flesh which is ours and Christ's, we can choose only between the perfect completion of man or perfect nihilism.

III. Our Resurrection:

The More Precise Idea of the Contents of This Article of Faith

THESE last few considerations on the resurrection of the body are an attempt to improve understanding of the meaning and intended content of this article of faith.

We have already gained a decisive point of departure through our previous explorations, both positive and negative. Positive, in that we said that the resurrection of the body as a dogma contains the hope of our belief that man as a whole, i.e., as having lived his one only life in a concrete and corporeal way, has an absolute validity. Negative, in that we said, upon first agreeing not to exclude *a priori* any aspect of human existence for this completion, we can and *must* impose discretion on ourselves when faced with the question of the manner of this completion. We have to admit that we cannot picture it; we become entangled in improbable apocalyptic theories if we portray it indiscreetly, thereby little by little forgetting that these representations are aids in expressing the unimagineable, and not descriptions of the essence of this

unimagineable future event. With this basic principle as our vantage point, a principle which is not a later rationalistic dilution of the beliefs but proceeds by its own impetus, we may now comment on various questions in the same way, by approaching the positive and negative limits.

The teaching of the resurrection includes the promise that every one will possess his own body in the perfected state. However, this is not to insist that a particular material substance that can be physically determined by us, such as that of the body in the grave, must be included in our perfected existence. We cannot take the "empty tomb," a necessary element within our history, as a sign from God within the limits of our experience, and force it to fit our conceptions regarding resurrection.

A person who finds it difficult to conceive of it should not therefore feel compelled to deny the fact of resurrection itself. It is possible to conceive of our own completely transfigured corporeality without having to decide the question of corporeality in a particular sense — a body that becomes our own former one in that it is taken into the living force of our person. Is not our body our own throughout our lives despite the continuing change of substance it undergoes? That which is *assumed* becomes an integral part of it in that it is assumed in the unity of the individual. Questions pertaining to the possibility of resurrection in the case of those devoured by cannibals, or those who died in the embryonic state, are not to be taken seriously; they only attest to an inability to grasp the contents of this article of faith.

It is implicit in the article on Christ's Resurrection

that persons who have "already" risen from the dead do exist—if we may take the liberty to express it this way. In the case of Christ at least we know it to be a fact. However, this knowledge does not allow us to inquire into "where" and at what "point of time" He is. For if we inquire about such a place in time-and-space of a human who is in the beyond, we must set the pre-condition that such a person, in order to exist corporeally, must then exist in *our* concept of time and space and form a homogeneous whole with our world and its final time-in-space. But this premise is quite erroneous. The essential finiteness of physical space does not at all exclude the possibility of our thinking of a thing as having a spaciality that is different from ours in a qualitative sense (even if we cannot conceive of such a thing) without having to fit it into the co-ordinates of our physical world. If modern physics holds the realm of our physical experience to be final in its entirety, it may be right in asserting that and still consider the question of "where" this final spaciality of the physical world as a whole is located, as meaningless. In the same way corporeality and homogeneous classification are not the same thing within our time-space system. This must be firmly held in mind in order to avoid posing wrong and inherently senseless questions about the dogma of the resurrection. This particular time-space factor, incommensurate with the one we know, that we must ascribe as possible to those risen from the dead, may be looked upon only as a middle road not immediately attainable, a middle way between two extremes which cannot be *allowed*: on the one hand, a declaration which would re-incorporate the risen into the

sphere of our essentially imperfect mode of existence, which in fact is the real thing to be conquered; on the other hand, a declaration that would rob creation of its beautiful finality and equate it with God, who from the outset is above and beyond everything.

Just as we cannot imagine the transfigured body, we cannot conceive of its life as the culmination of such corporeality. St. Paul calls this body heavenly, pneumatic (filled with the heavenly spirit). And this not in the way of explanation, but to emphasize the radical difference of this body. He claims nothing more than that *this* corporeality corresponds to the total condition of man as completed before God. For this reason he emphasizes just as decisively that flesh and blood, i.e., we in our present condition (the only one we know by experience), cannot be heirs to God's kingdom without undergoing a radical transformation which would not be any less radical if the day of judgment reached us while alive, than the change which befalls the very core of our being at our death. Life, the acting out of this bodily reality, we need not picture for ourselves. Between it and the world of our imagining lies the world of death and transformation. And resurrection is *not* a return into this world of death but its opposite. He who skeptically asks in the face of this corporeality, "what would we do with it for all eternity?", would betray, quite simply, the fact that he thinks of our present body; or that, involved as he is in his present state he cannot conceive of a final spiritual being fully realized in all its aspects, and so thinks it impossible to conceive of or profess belief in such a state of being. Or he imagines this finality to be time extended to infinity.

But this kind of time would be, as Aquinas already realized, not the beatific state of a transfigured human, but a sign of damnation in hell.

Harking back to the factual point of departure in our discussion of the resurrection (excluding the testimony of Christ), i.e., the total validity of the single concrete history of the human individual in a single world, then it becomes self-evident that in the resurrection of the body we are promised as a matter of course the transfigured completion of the world, a "new earth," the Scriptures call it. We may speak of this in a positive as well as a negative way, as we did in considering the transfigured body of the individual: the resurrection is believable as the final event of a world and its history, in which the living God Himself has taken a part and suffered. An attempt to picture this event would be the pretext of a person who cannot grasp that he must believe in the final completion in spite of the darkness of death; such a thing cannot be calculated.

The total all-encompassing solution is always the most difficult because it must integrate everything; it taxes our narrowness of spirit, which demands short-term, easily comprehensible solutions, to the utmost. And so it is, too, with the question of the final End. He who denies this world and removes man from the earth and places him into the (supposedly) pure realm of the spiritual is guilty of betraying and mutilating, as it were, the child of this earth. On the other hand he who lets man be crushed in the jaws of cruel nature has no conception of the ideas of person and spirit. He who does not believe that the man of this world and the man of the spirit will one

day be reconciled and thus achieve perfection denies that the one God, in a single act, created spirit and matter towards the fulfillment of a unique end. The Christian has the total solution, even though it is a most difficult and incalculable one. He derives belief in such a solution and the courage to pursue it through the word of God. The Resurrection testifies to this fact, for the Word God itself was made Flesh, and thereby included in the future fulfillment of all.

